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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a longitudinal study of student teachers' perceptions of their supervision by cooperating teachers and university supervisors at a small state university. An open-ended survey gathered the opinions of 469 student teachers. Researchers coded survey responses to identify common themes about important skills or characteristics of successful cooperating teachers and university supervisors. Results highlighted 11 themes regarding cooperating teachers' supervision: guide, feedback, expert, style, power, welcome, support, ideas, cooperating teacher choice, evaluation/grades, and triad of student, cooperating teacher, and university supervisor. There were nine themes regarding supervisors: visits, support, help, feedback, availability, expectations, guide, the triad, and grades. Results suggest that workshops and training materials for cooperating teachers and university supervisors should focus on themes that are both important to student teachers and changeable. It appears that it is important and possible to help cooperating teachers learn how to give feedback to student teachers about their teaching and how to guide them through the student teaching semester. It is necessary for university supervisors to give feedback and support as needed throughout the student teaching semester. Cooperating teacher selection criteria should focus on most important but less changeable characteristics. Universities should select cooperating teachers who are regarded as expert teachers and supervisors who have ideas to share with the student teachers they mentor. The student teacher survey is appended. (SM)

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What Student Teachers Tell Us

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Abstract

This paper reports on a seven-semester longitudinal study of student teachers' perceptions of their supervision by their cooperating teachers and university supervisors at a small state university in Pennsylvania. A survey with open-ended questions was used for gather the opinions of students teachers (n = 469). Survey responses were coded to identify common themes which identify important skills or characteristics of successful cooperating teachers and university supervisors. This study provides information that can be useful in both the selection and training of cooperating teachers and university supervisors

What Student Teachers Tell Us

This qualitative study was begun to evaluate the impact of changes our small, public university made in all of our teacher education programs in preparation for an NCATE accreditation review. All education programs adopted the theme, "Teacher as Reflective Decision Maker," and made changes in student teaching requirements to encourage reflection. A text by Posner (1993), Field Experience: A Guide to Reflective Teaching (3rd ed.), was adopted to help develop a common definition of reflection. This text was used in many early courses to prepare students for the new student teaching requirements.

Student teachers develop a portfolio including reflective exercises in goal setting, journaling, audio- and videotaping, and a final progress report about their professional development during student teaching. Creating a portfolio gives student teachers the opportunity to take charge of their own development and to determine a portion of their student teaching grade. To encourage student teacher responsibility for their own professional development, a clinical supervision model (Acheson & Gall, 1997) was introduced in workshops for cooperating teachers and university supervisors and in a required Masters course in supervision.

The Problem

This study gathered student teachers' perceptions of current teacher education programs as we made changes in preparation for NCATE, namely more emphasis on reflection, more uniform student teaching requirements which are outlined in a revised student teaching manual (Woolley, 1995), and training for cooperating teachers and university supervisors in a clinical supervision model. A companion study evaluated cooperating teachers' perception and evaluation of student teachers. This paper focuses on the supervision of student teachers.

Method

A survey of six open-ended questions (see Appendix) asks for student teachers' perceptions regarding their program prior to student teaching, their supervision by cooperating teachers and university supervisors, the student teaching requirements, the on-campus workshops, and other topics student teachers deem relevant. A survey with open-ended questions was developed to give student teachers latitude to express any idea, negative or positive. Data have been collected for seven semesters—fall 1993 and spring and fall 1994, 1995, and 1996.

The Director of Student Teaching administers the survey, rather than university supervisors, during a meeting for that purpose on the final day of the student teaching semester to insure a high response rate and the anonymity of student teachers' responses. Student teachers do not sign the survey, although they do sign an attendance sheet and on the survey they indicate their teacher education program, age group, and sex. The purpose of the survey—the improvement of teacher education and student teaching for future students—is explained. In this setting many students appear to complete the survey very thoughtfully, spending from fifteen to thirty minutes. Students are allowed to visit with others during this time, so it is likely that some responses would be different if no talking was allowed.

An effort is made with the assistance of university supervisors to get an anonymous survey from each student teacher. The response rate has averaged between eighty and ninety percent.

The sample (n=469) includes student teachers from all teacher education programs (art, home economics, elementary, music, secondary, and special education) at Mansfield University.

Student teacher responses have been coded and analyzed for patterns (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984) by reading the responses and labeling similar comments with the same code. To check the reliability of the coding fall 1993 and spring 1994 surveys were coded by a second person.

Results

An analysis of the responses to question 5 about cooperating teachers' supervision yielded eleven themes, listed in descending order based on frequency of comments. Excerpts from the data help clarify the meaning of each theme. Both positive (+) and negative (–) examples are included.

1. Guide: What CTs (cooperating teachers) do to guide STs (student teachers) through the student teaching experience and prepare them for becoming a "real" teacher
   - \+ "Guided me in troubled areas."
   - +/– "He made time for us to talk about students and classes. I realized how important this was when my second coop. never discussed."
   - \+ "My cooperating teacher knew ahead of time how to prepare for a student teacher."
   - \+ "Helped me with organizational skills."
   - \+ "My second co-op. was much more helpful in helping me prepare for lessons and find things in professional literature in order to help me improve myself as an educator."
   - \+ "Talked to me daily and gave a lot of suggestions and advice."
   - \+ "My co-ops were always there when I needed advice."
   - \+ "They went over lists of what they considered to be important."
   - \+ My first co-op. had my entire schedule mapped out at my orientation visit. I felt very organized and prepared for that experience."
   - \+ "Helped me prepare a resume."
   - \+ "Set up an observation of me by the Superintendent of Schools."
2. Feedback: How a CT observes and talks about a ST's teaching
   - \+ "My first cooperating teaching gave me positive reinforcement and constructive criticism."
   - \+ "Gave a daily critique that included many constructive criticisms."
   - \+ "Conferences before and after observations; kept journal; videotaped several times"
   - \+ "Talked over lesson plans with me."
   - \+ "Talked at the end of every day."
   - \+ "Reviewed Student Teacher Evaluation Report midway through so I had time to improve."
   - \+ "Kept a notebook on me; I wrote back; this helped us communicate."
   - – Never gave me specific feedback
   - – Never gave positive feedback and practically yelled at me

3. Expert: STs' assessments of whether their CTs are excellent teachers
   - \+ "Modeled many ideas and asked what I thought
   - \+ "Taught me many things that courses didn't touch on."
   - \+ "Both of my co-ops. were full of energy and up-to-date with current trends in education. They were an inspiration."
   - \+ "Both my co-ops. were excellent. I feel they taught me about all aspects of being a music teacher."
   - \+ "I was given instruction on behavioral management, lead teacher skills, etc., which I found extremely beneficial."
   - \+ "Both my cooperating teachers enjoy what they do and this was reflected in the things they did."
   - \+ "My cooperating teachers were excellent role models."
   - – "Provided a negative example; I would not teach the way she did."
   - – "CTs should be screened more carefully; one of mine was lacking in fundamentals: discipline, organization, timeliness."
4. Style: STs' perceptions of whether they could try out ideas and teach differently than their CTs
   - \+ "Allowed me to do "my own thing."
   - \+ "My CT utilized my abilities from day one."
   - \+ "Let me explore and teach my way."
   - \+ "Let me find a teaching style that fit my needs as well as the students."
   - \+ "Let me try anything."
   - \+ "Let me do the things I wanted."
   - \+ "Let me make mistakes and learn from them."
   - \+ "Continually encouraged me to try new approaches."
   - \+ "Started off giving suggestions; led me into developing my own methods."
   - – "I couldn't do any "special" activities."
5. Power: Comments about the CT's willingness to let the ST be in charge
   - \+ "Let me do what I wanted to do with the students."
   - \+ "Left me alone for extended periods."
   - \+ "Let go of control of the class."
   - \+ "Left the room frequently."
   - \+ "Allowed me to take over the class for two weeks."
   - \+ "I had the responsibility of teaching four out of six classes by the second week--made my feel like my co-op had a lot of trust in me."
   - – "Would not let me do anything until I actually started teaching."
   - – "My CT had a big problem letting go."
   - – "I had to beg to take over the class."
   - – "Left me in the room the first day with no role book, no seating chart, no idea of where he was."
6. Welcome: Things CTs did to make STs feel welcome in their classroom
   - \+ "Went out of their way to make me feel comfortable."
   - \+ "Treated me as an equal."

+ "Treated me with respect."
+ "Treated me like a person."
+ "Introduced me to the faculty."
+ "Accepted me."
+ "Took time to know me as a person."
– "Felt like I was unwanted."
– "Students knew I was temporary."

7. Support: A sense by the ST that a CT would give positive emotional support no matter what happens
   + "Positive and supportive."
   + "Gave me a lot of confidence."
   + "Upbeat and positive throughout."
   + "Positive and reassuring."
   + "They were helpful and supportive."
8. Ideas: CTs willingness to share teaching ideas and resources
   + "Shared many ideas."
   + "Gave me a ton of written information."
   + "I feel the my CTs gave me invaluable information."
9. CT Choice: About the selection of CTs
   + "I think all cooperating teachers should be checked out before taking a student teacher."
   + "I recommend checking into all co-ops. I was cheated out of a semester of learning."
   + "CTs and STs need to be match up better. If co-ops. have had bad experiences with prior STs, please consider how that will effect the next ST.
10. Evaluation/grades: Comments about the CT's role in evaluation and grading
   – "I feel our final grade in student teaching should be based on our co-ops' evaluation."
   – "The grading should depend more on our classroom experience and cooperating teachers' comments and less on reflective exercises."
11. Triad of ST, CT, & US (university supervisor): Comments about triad members
   + "My CTs helped me realize that perfection is not expected at this stage (as my supervisor implied). I won't teach like I have thirty years experience until I have taught thirty years."
   – "My university supervisor was too uptight and judgmental. She would tell us something and then completely contradict herself. My co-op. even commented on it."

These themes about the supervision of cooperating teachers are similar to ones reported by Conner, Killmer, McKay, & Whigham (1993). They asked student teachers: "What are some of the things your cooperating teacher did which you valued and/or appreciated?" (p. 74). They reported eleven positive and two negative categories of responses. They labeled categories differently, but the match between the student teachers' responses in the two studies is very good.

Responses to question 6 about the supervisory practices of university supervisors were categorized by the following themes, also listed in descending order of frequency of comments.

1. Visits: Comments about the scheduling, frequency, or manner in which visits were conducted by the US
   - \+ "She tried to fit my schedule as best as possible."
   - \+ "It was helpful knowing ahead of time when he would come. If a supervisor just drops in anytime you may not be teaching a lesson right, which my cause the ST to become very uneasy with the whole visit."
   - \+ "Visitation schedule appear flawless to me."
   - \+ "The visitation schedule was adequate."
   - – "He was there only two times the first school and three at the second."
   - – "I was displeased with the visit of my department chairperson. It was announced one day before and he based his opinion of me on watching one class."
   - – "I wish my supervisor would have had more time to spend with me."
   - – "When they give feedback, it doesn't help as much because they don't come as often."
2. Support: A sense by the ST that a US would be there (i.e., give positive emotional support), no matter what
   - \+ "He was very helpful in encouraging me to press on when I got discouraged by my first coop."
   - \+ "Her dedication and enthusiasm as well as encouragement were an inspiration."
   - \+ "The best thing my supervisor did was be nothing but supportive and helpful every step of the way."
   - \+ "She knew I was having a bad experience and was there to support me through it."
   - \+ "She gave me needed support and was always making sure that I was comfortable in my experience. I felt I could depend on her."
   - \+ "He was an excellent support system throughout the experience."
   - \+ "Made me feel secure, lots of support."
   - \+ "He was always upbeat and gave me loads of support."
3. Help: Related to the US ability or willingness to give specific, helpful suggestions
   - \+ "Offered suggestions."
   - \+ She also gave me suggestions that were very helpful to me in the future."
   - \+ "Supplied me with various teaching strategies and game plans."
   - \+ "My university supervisor was a great help to me in so many ways."
   - \+ "She gave me ideas for fulfilling my teaching assignment. Also, she advised me on how to motivate students. It really helped me a lot."
   - – "I think all supervisors should be required to teach in the setting of the people they supervise. Elementary supervisors should be required to teach in elementary classrooms."
4. Feedback: About how a US observed and talked about a ST's teaching
   - \+ "My supervisor was kind in her constructive criticism of my weaknesses and was wise in her support of my strengths."
   - \+ "I really took advantage of his constructive criticisms."

+ "He always took the time to go over my evaluation."
+ "My university supervisor was very thorough and organized. She wrote detailed observations and made constructive comments."
+ "Gave me observational comments, not saying much about good or bad, just observing."
+ "My supervisor asked me questions and guided me in helping myself improve."
+ "Immediate feedback."
+ "He was helpful in critiquing some of the style and logistical points of my teaching."

5. Availability: A sense of being able to contact US any time about anything
   + "He was always glad to hear from me and was truly wonderful."
   + "She was always there when I needed advice!"
   + "She always kept in contact with me."
   + "I could get a hold of her at any time."
   + "She made herself available to discuss anything."
   + "I could call anytime, day or night, if I needed anything."
   + "Made one feel free to ask questions."

6. Expectations: Comments about the level, clarity, or uniformity of standards
ave examples of the assignments so I knew what he expected of me."
   + "My supervisor did an excellent job of motivating me to achieve the highest standard in student teaching."
   + "Very good about letting me substitute work requirements for other things to do."
   – "I think supervisors should be more strict with the dress code. . . . I think supervisors are too lackadaisical about that."
   – "Needs to give more deadlines."
   – "More connection to what the requirements are and paperwork to hand in."
   – "Offer a chance to have communication as well as free expression in my journal."
   – "My supervisor was too uptight. She was overly judgmental."
   – "University supervisors' expectations need to be more uniform."
   – "All elem. ed. majors should have the same expectations - some had to type five-page papers where I only had to do smaller one. It doesn't seem fair to have such difference between supervisors."
   – "Be more open minded. Not everyone teaches like him."
   – My university supervisor needs to remember that student teachers are still learning. According to my supervisor, 'This is not the time to learn but the time to apply.' If my learning was complete, student teaching should be an internship, not a course."

7. Guide: US's ability in guiding ST through the student teaching experience, especially as a liaison between university and all involved
   + "Kept me informed when I was off campus."
   + "I appreciated her my supervisor's ability to mediate situations in a professional manner."
   + "My supervisor answered all my questions."

- "She tried to be a liaison between my second coop and myself. I thought she should have been more on top of the problems I had in my second experience."

8. Triad of ST, CT, & US: Comments about triad members
   - "My university supervisor shared some of my personal journal entries with my cooperating teacher without my permission."
   - "When he talks to the co-op, he acts like his feedback is so much more important than the co-op's, even though she sees me every day."
   - "Supervisors need to remember that their philosophy and views of education are unique to themselves. Both of my co-ops disagreed with my supervisor on one or several things, yet he still forced his views on all of us."
   - "I think co-op's desires must come first. I was placed in the awkward position of having to balance the two people's desires and ended up being chastised for fulfilling my co-ops' desires for me rather than my supervisor's.
   - "He should be more cooperative with cooperating teachers (i.e., notifying them when he is coming).

9. Grades. US's role in evaluation and grading
   + "I feel that I was graded on my educational philosophy more than my teaching techniques and effort. I will discuss this with my university supervisor today."
   + "A supervisor needs to see a student teacher in action and grade as if the student teacher is actually earning the grade, not getting it."

Conclusions

It appears that our student teachers were pleased with their supervision, based on the preponderance of positive comments. No student teacher was negative about both experiences, which suggests one rationale for two rather than one student teaching assignments. The most important themes, based on the frequency of comments, were feedback, guide, and expert for cooperating teachers and visits, support, ideas, and feedback for university supervisors. Several themes—supervisor visits, CT choice, the ST-CT-US triad, and evaluation/grades—seem to relate more to the student teaching program than to supervision. Of these themes only "visits" is mentioned frequently, most likely because question 6 asks for comments on the visitation schedule.

Discussion

Student teachers' comments about their cooperating teachers identified several characteristics that could be used to guide the selection and training of cooperating teachers at many institutions. Similarly, desirable characteristics and skills are identified for university supervisors. Some of the desirable characteristics seem like they could be developed by the limited training limited training normally provided to CTs and USs. Others seems like more fundamental characteristics or skills that persons would possess or not. That latter group seem less easily developed during workshop training. These characteristics or themes can be arranged on a scale from trainable to less trainable skills:

For Cooperating Teacher Themes

More Changeable						Less changeable	
Guide	Feedback	Welcome	Support	Ideas	Expert	Style	Power

For University Supervisor Themes

More Changeable					Less Changeable
Guide	Feedback	Availability	Support	Ideas	Expectations

This data from student teachers suggests that workshops and training materials for cooperating teachers and university supervisors should focus on themes that are both important to student teachers and also changeable. For example, it appears that it is important and possible to help cooperating teachers learn how to give feedback to student teachers about their teaching and how to guide them through the student teaching semester. It is necessary for university supervisors to give feedback and also support as needed throughout the student teaching semester. Selection criteria should focus on most important but less changeable characteristics. That is, universities should select cooperating teachers who are regarded as "expert" teachers. Universities should also select supervisors who have "ideas" to share with the student teachers they mentor.

Next Steps

Survey responses are being typed, coded, and analyzed electronically with a qualitative software package called NUD*IST™ (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching Theorizing) (Richards & Richards, 1985). Electronic analysis will facilitate the asking of questions, such as: Are there differences in the responses of student teachers in six teacher education programs? Are the responses of younger students different from older students? Are the responses of females different from males? Have student teachers' responses changed throughout this seven-semester study?

At Mansfield University the survey results are reported to decision making and planning groups such as the Teacher Education Council of Chair, the Student Teacher Advisory Council, and the Teacher Education Advisor Council. Current discussion questions related to questions 5 and 6 include:

1. What are the implications for choosing cooperating teachers and university supervisors?
2. What are the implications for training cooperating teachers and university supervisors?
3. Should we more clearly separate the roles of supervisor and evaluator as suggested by Nolan (1997), by making the cooperating teacher the supervisor and the university supervisor the evaluator?

Student teaching is a critical component of every teacher education program. This study provides important insights from the perspective of student teachers about the selection and training of cooperating teachers and university supervisors. The response to other survey questions, not included in this report, may yield similar insights about student teacher reflection and encouraging their responsibility for their own professional development.

Appendix: Student Teacher Questionnaire *

Congratulations on completing student teaching. We intend to use the information you provide on this questionnaire to help us improve our program. Do not put your name on this questionnaire.

1. What is your age? (Check one of the following.)
   ___ Under 25 ___ 26 - 35 ___ 36 - 45 ___ 46 - 55 ___ Over 55

2. What is your gender? (Check one of the following.)
   ___ Female ___ Male

3. What is your major? (Check one of the following.)
   ___ Art Ed. ___ Elem. Ed. ___ Home Economics Ed.
   ___ Music Ed. ___ Sec. Ed. ___ Spec. Ed.

4. Comment on your teacher education program in relation to your preparation for student teaching.

5. What are some of the things your cooperating teacher(s) did which you thought were important? Any changes recommended?

6. What are some of the things your university supervisor did which you thought were important? Any changes recommended? (Please comment on the visitation schedule.)

7. We want to make the requirements for student teaching uniform. Comment on any of the requirements.

8. Your student teaching semester has included days on campus. Please comment on the topics and sessions that were most useful and on your recommended changes for the:
   a) Day 1: Inservice Workshop
   b) Day 2: Reflective Workshop

9. Please feel free to make any other open-ended comments regarding either the Mansfield University teacher education programs and/or the student teaching experience.

Thank you for your help. Keep in touch and best of luck.

* Note: On the actual survey questions 4-9 are spread out with only two questions per pages to encourage longer responses.

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